

# YAK GOES TO COURT

*The Yak loves sharing Field Trips. Today, we're sharing a trip to the Michigan Supreme Court Learning Center.*

Students from Hosmer Elementary School in Detroit walked into a big limestone building in Lansing, went through a security check and hung up their coats. Then they sat down and listened as a man gave them a special greeting.

"Welcome to our learning center," Michigan Supreme Court Justice Michael Cavanagh told the 39 students from Hosmer, which is on Detroit's east side.

Students from the school's fourth and fifth grades went to Lansing for field trips earlier this year. They went to the state Capitol and also to the Michigan Supreme Court Learning Center.

At the learning center, people can learn about the court system and how it is involved in their daily lives. They learn about their rights and responsibilities. Nearly 25,000 people have toured the learning center since it opened in November 2002.

The learning center includes displays, quizzes, games and interactive exhibits that show how a jury is selected, what to do if you are stopped by a police officer and why it's important to vote, including voting for judges. Other topics are the differences between trial courts and appellate courts and between criminal and civil cases.

Katisha Brown, 10, studied an exhibit demonstrating the job of a defense attorney. Meanwhile, Janay Smith and Trakeisha Smith, both 10, answered multiple-choice questions about product liability, which protects people from unsafe manufactured items. The girls said they could figure out the right answers because they made sense. They answered every question correctly.

Visitors can also learn how laws protect the environment, like what can be put into the air and how much of a regulated chemical is allowed. The

amount is usually measured in parts per million, billion or trillion. It sounds like that would be a tiny amount. But an exhibit shows that even tiny bit of certain odors can still be strong.

Hosmer student Jamia Whiteside, 10, looked at the exhibit. She pressed some buttons. As she did, the buttons released scents that smelled like cotton candy, soy sauce or green pepper at measurements in parts per million, billion or trillion. "Ugh, that stinks!" Jamia said.

Bobby Long, 9, said his favorite display was the one about teen court. Some counties in Michigan have teen courts. Students aged 10 to 16 who are charged with certain crimes can explain what happened to high school students, who act as a jury. The jury members discuss the case with a real judge, who issues the sentence.

At the learning center, visitors use a computer to learn about a case in which a young woman is charged with stealing a pair of jeans. Bobby liked the teen court exhibit.

"You can pick the witnesses and see what they say," Bobby explained.

In another area of the learning center, Kamille Lee, 10, was learning whether a school can search a student's personal locker. A student might expect it is private, and it usually is. But it is school property. According to the exhibit, the school can search a student locker under certain conditions. A locker search is allowed if school officials have a good reason to do it, like suspecting there is something inside that is against the law or school rules.

Justice Cavanagh said the learning center is so popular that officials from several other states have visited it because they want to build similar facilities.

"Our goal with the learning center is to educate and provide information to young people about the basic operation of our legal system," he said. He told the Hosmer students that laws are based on



Detroit's Hosmer Elementary fourth-grader Tiara Goodwyn, 9, admires a statue in the Michigan Supreme Court Learning Center.

common sense and that the learning center would help them understand their rights and responsibilities under the law.

Hosmer fifth-grade teacher Gwen Williams accompanied the students on the field trip.

"They were really excited about the hands-on activities about the judicial system," she said.

The learning center is on the first floor of the Michigan Hall of Justice, which opened in October 2002. This is the first time the Supreme Court has its own building.

Inside the same building is the courtroom for the state supreme court, which is Michigan's highest court. The courtroom is round like the sentencing circles of Native American tribes, in which all members of the community could contribute as decisions were made.

The building also includes a courtroom for the appeals court. The courtrooms of the state supreme court and the appeals court are open to the public when the courts are in session.

To enter the building, visitors go through a security check like one at an airport. Many court buildings now require security checks to keep the areas safe.

Admission to the Michigan Supreme Court Learning Center is free. It is open weekdays 9-4 and closed on state holidays. One-hour guided tours for groups of 8 are available by reservation; call 517-373-7229. Tours are recommended for people from fourth grade to adult. For more about the learning center, go to [www.courts.michigan.gov](http://www.courts.michigan.gov).

By Marty Hair



Hosmer Elementary students tour the Michigan Supreme Court Learning Center, in Lansing.

PHOTOS BY AL GOLDIS